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AUTHOR Sutton, Eve
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ABSTRACT

Educators have a responsibility to promote peace. The goals of peace education include disarmament, the prevention of war, progress toward cultural pluralism, and the development of inner peace. Concerns about peace should not be limited to the idealism of children, but must extend to the educator, a person who holds great potential to influence the lives of young people by example. Ways of bringing peace to the classroom are suggested. A list of resources concludes the document. (DB)

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PEACE EDUCATION NEEDS YOU:

Finding Your Niche as a Peace Educator

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This paper was presented by Eve Sutton
for the Peace Education SIG
at the Annual Meeting of the AERA,
Boston, Massachusetts, April 16-20, 1990.

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Eve Sutton
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This paper is a product of my search for some answers to the moral, ethical, and practical dilemmas confronting me as an educator and as a person. I hope it will be a useful contribution to the work of the Peace Education Special Interest Group at AERA, and to other educators who are interested in beginning or continuing their work in Peace Education.

Eve Sutton
April, 1990

FINDING YOUR NICHE IN PEACE EDUCATION

"Peace Education" is generally associated with the prevention of nuclear war and the promotion of non-violent alternatives for conflict resolution. As citizens of a planet that is poised for nuclear war, we have good reason to be concerned with preventing it. We also have reason to help children deal with the threat of it. To paraphrase the Assembly Bill which first mandated

Nuclear Age Education in California, school children are so terrified by the prospect of nuclear war, and so certain that such war is inevitable, that their worry interferes with their concentration and motivation in school.

Peace Education also includes programs that promote cultural pluralism, non-violent resolution of conflicts, better understanding of the causes and effects of war, and participation of children and adults in the peace movement. There is also a place for the study and teaching of inner peace as a means to global peace. As explained so eloquently in a paper by Lyall Crawford,

"A gentle spirit and manner weaken aggressiveness and mean-mindedness . . . Peaceful persons make for a peaceful world."

I certainly won't argue with the need for all these forms of Peace Education, nor do I see them as mutually exclusive. As our world becomes a multi-ethnic, multi-racial "global village," we have good reason to promote awareness, tolerance, and appreciation of other cultures.

In fact, it is my thesis that we not need to agree on a definition of "Peace Education," nor do we need to agree on a course of action, for Peace Education to work. Any effort made toward any of these goals--disarmament, the prevention of war, progress toward cultural pluralism, the development of inner peace--can be beneficial. Where Educators for Social Responsibility can improve things in one area, Taoists can improve things in another, and their efforts are not mutually exclusive.

It is my feeling that educators can have a dual role in promoting peace: their role as educated, articulate citizens, and their role as educators. In fact, as educators, they can work for peace through their influence in at least six areas:

Curriculum--the design, selection, review, and evaluation of curriculum, with appropriate attention to the "hidden" or affective curriculum

Instruction--from the subtle interactions between teacher and student to the nature of instruction in schools

Policy--the establishment of school-wide or even nation-wide policies concerning practices and programs that enhance, or hinder, Peace Education

Funding--establishing and continuing the funding for programs that encourage the growth of peace, and responsible investment practices to promote peace around the world

Public Opinion--providing clear, accurate information for the media, voters, and special interest groups

Colleagues--organizing supportive groups of educators to develop and promote workable ideas, to take advantage of the natural tendency for educators to promote peace, and to keep each other interested and active in our various projects

Consider the unique skills and opportunities you have as a citizen and as an educator. Consider also your special responsibilities, professional and personal. Finding your niche in Peace Education means using your skills, your opportunities, your resources, and your creativity to follow your passion, to give some expression or form to the impetus you feel for action.

Put into practice, a simple idea can be powerful. A subtle change in the way something is done can have far-reaching effects. If you have an idea of the changes you want to make, or the effect you want to have, you'll be prepared to recognize and take advantage of sudden opportunities. For example, I've long wondered why reading textbooks still include selections that glorify war. As a curriculum designer, I had an opportunity to influence the content of a reading curriculum for middle school students, In five minutes at one key meeting, I explained why I thought we should deliberately exclude any material that glorified war. There was no opposition, and we've kept to our plan so far. Considering that this curriculum will be used across the United States, the decision seems especially important.

PEACE--IT ISN'T JUST FOR KIDS

We teach by example. When we really want someone to learn something, we say, "Watch me. I'll show you how it's done. Then I'll help you do it."

Even more profound is the teaching we do just by living our lives. We can imagine an edgy, impatient teacher trying to establish a Peace Education curriculum, just as we can imagine a health teacher ducking into the teacher's lounge for a smoke. The two of them might even be successful in having a positive influence on students, but we can't help wondering about the underlying messages--the affective education--that their students receive. Actions speak louder than words.

On the other hand, it's almost inconceivable that exposure to a non-smoking teacher would induce students to smoke, or that a Peace Education teacher with a true feeling of inner peace would be edgy and impatient with students.

Think of what kids are really hearing when adults say something like, "Don't touch that cigarette! You're too young to smoke." Children learn that some day, they will grow out of the need for good health! We're fanatical about protecting children from vices when they're young, but we expect that they'll have vices as adults. Teenagers mark their entry into

adulthood by smoking, getting drunk, riding in speeding cars, and using drugs, even though they probably would be quick to keep a six-year-old from doing these things.

In much the same way, our society gives a subtle but effective message to children about peace.

We teach children to hope and pray for peace, to color pictures of a peaceful world and sing songs about living in harmony, but when they turn eighteen, we start turning them into soldiers. On their eighteenth birthday, they're suddenly "old enough to fight." To quote columnist Ellen Goodman,

"In one way or another, we purposely make children the repositories of our ideals. We allow them to hold up the standards we let slip. We encourage them to believe in possibilities the way they believe in Santa Claus.

. . . And then to grow out of it, as if caring were a pair of jeans.

"We raise our children with ethical time bombs, built-in disillusionment alarms. We allow them their ideals until they are fourteen, or eighteen, or twenty-two. But if they don't let go, we worry about whether they will be able to function in the real world.

"Adults KNOW that peace is swell, but you may need annihilation to save your national security. Adults KNOW that war is to be feared, but so is the fear of war.

"I suppose we make kids the repository of our highest ideals because children are powerless. In that way we can have our ideals and ignore them at the same time. We can assuage our conscience and maintain our status quo."

No one holds us quite so accountable as children and teenagers. They discover and rediscover the most obvious solutions to such "unsolvable" problems as war, bigotry, and oppression. "All the people of all the countries should just agree to stop fighting," say the kids. "Everyone should just learn to get along with everyone else." Most adults answer these suggestions with an indulgent or condescending response like, "Someday, when you're as old as I am, you'll realize why we can't just stop having wars. It's not as simple as you think."

I propose that we say instead, "Good idea! Think of what you'd like to do to stop wars. I'd love to have a peaceful word, and I'm sure you can really help." Let's teach these young people, and the adults around us, that common sense and idealism play a part in an adult's life. Let's show them that we refuse to accept the hypocrisy, cynicism, and fatalism that distinguish adults from their younger selves. If we believe that peace is achievable, then we can work to achieve it. If we think bigotry should die a quick death, then we don't have to keep it alive. The possibilities don't end just because we're no longer kids.

The biggest challenge, I think, concerns young people for whom life as a soldier would actually be an improvement. The sad, painful, honest truth is that some households are so filled with physical violence and emotional abuse that many young teenagers can't wait to get out, even if it means

living on the streets. The sad truth is that many of our nation's teens and young adults have a better chance of getting adequate food, shelter, and clothing in the armed services than they have of getting those things at home. In fact, they have a better chance of living--of not being killed, of not overdosing on drugs or committing suicide or dying of some disease--if they join the Army than if they stay in one of our more violent neighborhoods, where drugs, gang warfare, poverty, and the breakdown of the family combine with poor schools, unemployment, and a breakdown of social institutions to create a world that is both bleak and terrifying.

At night, the street is a battlefield. There are shootings, stabbings, and assassinations. There are screams of pain, threats, curses, the sounds of retching and of crying, of sirens, breaking glass, the angry shouting of the couple next door. By comparison, math homework seems irrelevant, and a quiet military barracks, with its clean sheets and comfortable beds, with its heater working, and its windows intact, and its promise of a hot shower and a full breakfast in the morning--by comparison, the barracks must seem irresistibly cozy, even luxurious. Peace is needed not only "in the world" or "between nations." Peace is needed even in our homes, in our neighborhoods, in our suburbs and cities. As educators and as responsible adults, we owe these kids our commitment to help them wherever we can.

BRINGING PEACE TO THE CLASSROOM

Here are my best suggestions for getting involved in Peace Education at the local level--one class, a few classes, one school, or a school district.

If your goal is to have a short period of intense involvement (say, a week or a month of work on one theme) you might begin by asking around to learn about similar projects that have been successful in your area. You might enlist the help of a corporate sponsor, as well as a group of supportive parents and volunteers from the community. Your activities can be planned to culminate in some special, unusual event: a field trip, a carnival, a visit from someone who is well-recognized for promoting peace, a long-distance phone call over a speaker phone, whatever. My personal preference is to have a school-wide picnic and a giant release of helium balloons with a wish or a message tied to each string. It's dramatic, inspiring, and fun. (It's also fairly harmless. I checked with some conservationists.)

The point is that Peace Education should be enjoyable for all concerned, so that living through the week or month of your project will itself be an education in the joys of peace. You don't want everyone to shudder at the thought of having another Peace Education Week next year!

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